TUMULTUOUS TIMES AND PRESSING STRATEGIC CHOICES FOR NATIONAL PUBLIC HEALTH INSTITUTES (NPHIS)

Summary report on a project in 2023 by the IANPHI European Regional Network.

SUMMARY

The National Public Health Institutes (NPHIs) are facing a multitude of challenges in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, including climate change, war and conflict, migration, lifestyle associated diseases, aging populations, and financial challenges – alongside a challenge of misinformation throughout. At the same time, medical and technological advances continuously change the game.

An online survey with 14 explorative questions was sent to members of the IANPHI Europe Regional Network of the International Association of National Public Health Institutes (IANPHI) on March 24, 2023. Fourteen out of 39 members of the IANPHI Europe Network replied. The preliminary survey results were discussed in the IANPHI Europe Regional Network meeting on April 20-21, 2023, followed by a webinar on November 8 open to all IANPHI Members.

Almost all answering NPHIs were in charge of their own strategy process, but for most of them, the strategy was approved by a superior external governmental body, such as the country's Ministry of Health. These topics were among the most important triggers and drivers for the strategy revision and developments: the COVID-19 pandemic, financial, political, shifts in society, epidemiology and health, climate and environment, technological developments, and internal factors. Asked about the top strategic questions, these issues were highlighted: purpose or mission, role, situation analysis, organisational structure, quality, technological advances and taking lessons learned from the pandemic forward. On priority tasks, a range of topics were listed, some of which were: health security, preparedness, and response, including vaccine preparedness; non-communicable diseases (NCDs), including obesity, and child and adolescent mental health; climate, environment, and health; one-health, migration, social inequalities, and aging. From a more overarching perspective, there were recommendations for moving from individually lifestyle-oriented interventions towards systems-level change and shifting more towards preparedness and prevention efforts. Other factors mentioned were social factors and determinants of health, new technologies, health security, research, organisation of public health, the workforce and funding and financing.

At the IANPHI Europe Regional Network meeting, the challenges that the institutes felt least prepared for were related to the following themes: trust and information, including how to retain trust by citizens and politicians, and how to rebut disinformation; the relationship to policy and politics, both on dealing with inconsistencies and uncertainties in politics and on challenges in translating knowledge into policy; decreasing budgets; workforce capacity, developing and retaining competent staff; and cross-sectoral work and collaboration across disciplines and sectors.

At the webinar open to all IANPHI Members, many of the same topics and issues as in the Europe network meeting, were raised by the presenters showing that the findings from European NPHIs are recognizable in other geographical regions as well. Challenges on development and retainment a high-quality workforce were highlighted in the ensuing discussion.

The last five years seem to have created more dynamic developments than previous five-year cycles. These tumultuous times have brought forward new or intensified fundamental strategic questions for the NPHIs to deal with. Three of them are:

- What should the role of the NPHI be in the national and international public health architecture? What functions can best be placed in an NPHI? The revised list of essential public health functions, and the IANPHI and World Health Organization (WHO) co-published document Application of the essential public health functions: an integrated and comprehensive approach to public health may be a guiding document.
- How can we redefine the relationship between NPHIs and key national partners, and especially: politicians and government, society and the media, academia, and the private sector?
- How can we get the priorities between the big agenda items right? How best to balance between pandemic preparedness, NCDs, public health effects of climate change, and inequalities of health to name a few?

The findings summarized in this report can be useful for NPHIs in their strategic work and for IANPHI in how to best support institutes in Europe and beyond.

INTRODUCTION

The Covid-19 pandemic has dramatically changed the circumstances for many National Public Health Institutes (NPHIs). The current war in Ukraine and economic challenges have made the situation even more volatile. These more recent changes are occurring against the background of an emerging landscape of public health challenges, including those associated with new pandemics, climate change, war and conflict, nuclear events, migration, overweight, poor diet, physical inactivity, and aging populations – alongside a challenge of misinformation throughout. At the same time, technological advances continuously change the game, with recent leaps in vaccine technology, big data, digitalization, and artificial intelligence. All this impacts on what NPHIs should do and how they should work.

Many NPHIs have recently revised their strategy or are in the process of doing so. Even among those that don't, many grapple with existential strategic choices. As NPHIs across Europe are charting their path forward, this project aimed at gathering and sharing ideas and plans among the NPHIs and their associated institutions. Through the sharing, NPHIs can learn from each other, get new ideas on how to handle the new challenges, and increase collaborations between NPHIs.

We developed an online survey questionnaire with a total of 14 explorative questions sent by e-mail to the members of the European network of the International Association of National Public Health Institutes (IANPHI) on March 24, 2023, with a reminder on April 4. The preliminary results were presented and discussed in the Annual Meeting of the IANPHI European Network on April 20-21, followed by a webinar on November 8 open to all IANPHI Members. This report is a semi-systematic summary of some of the main results from the survey and the two discussions.

SURVEY RESULTS

By April 17, 12 out of 39 members of the IANPHI Europe Network had submitted completed surveys, that were presented and discussed at the Annual Meeting. Two more NPHIs submitted the survey in the summer of 2023.

Of the 14 replies, 12 were engaged in a strategy process, one was not, and one answer was blank on this question.

Asking whether the NPHI was in charge of the strategy process, all but two answered yes. One NPHI said they were involved, but it was initiated and decided by government, and one wrote it was outlined by an independent review panel. For 10 out of 14 NPHIs, the strategy was approved by a superior governmental body, three did not specify on approval, and only one NPHI was also in charge of approving the strategy.

On the question to what extent do the NPHI have autonomy to make own strategic choices, most NPHIs have a large degree of autonomy. However, for most there are some limitations set in annual letter of allocation, funding from government and other funding sources, commissioning of work, and a request for final approval.

TRIGGERS AND DRIVERS

The NPHIs were asked about the triggers and drivers for the strategy revision and developments. Many of the responses to these two questions were overlapping, so they are presented together:

Covid-19 Pandemic

Experiences and lessons learned from the recent Covid-19 pandemic was a main trigger and driver for the strategy processes for all NPHIs either directly or implicit. In addition, many of the other triggers and drivers mentioned below are related to the pandemic.

Financial

During the pandemic, NPHIs experienced substantially increased financial resources to respond to the many pandemic challenges. To varying degrees and at different times, many NPHIs have experienced substantial governmental budget cuts. NPHIs also report about increased general costs and new mandated tasks without funding. There are also reported governmental demands for increased search for other sources of funding than from the government. This has necessitated increased prioritising of scientific activities. Some governmental budget cuts are also reported to be due to financial constraints caused by other factors than the pandemic.

Political

The pandemic has for several countries triggered reassessment processes and leading to reorganisations of the governmental health structure, including for the NPHIs. Some NPHIs report of a political will to strengthen the position and profile of NPHI, some get new tasks and mandates, in other countries they are reshuffled between governmental agencies.

The pandemic has showed a need to update legislature in a variety of areas like data ownership, data sharing, privacy rights, and research design. Several NPHIs experienced a political threat to their scientific independence exposing a need for an improved mandate and more clearly defined roles and responsibilities for NPHIs.

There is also a need for increased collaboration across sectors, for data, research, and design and assessment of policies, and including increased international collaboration. The European Union (EU) has introduced many new measures, structures, and activities, including the development of a common European Health Union, which will impact on NPHIs in the member states.

Shifts in Society, Epidemiology and Health

Both the society and the challenges of health are rapidly changing. And the NPHIs need to change with them, addressing the new and emerging needs in the updated strategies. There are epidemiological and demographic shifts, some of the factors are due to the pandemic. There are changes in the global situation, and many new initiatives in the EU impacting on NPHIs in the member states, including the upcoming European Health Data Space. One NPHI mentioned the increased risk of bioterrorism events as a factor, others the need to focus more on social determinants of health, on

public health and social measures, and on readdressing research priorities more towards root causes.

Climate and Environment

One topic, that several NPHIs mentioned, was the need for NPHIs to have an updated strategy for the ongoing climate change and its impact on health. One NPHI highlighted the nitrogen emission crises as a topic of concern, and another brought in the international aspect of the EU Green Deal and the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals (UN's SDGs) as influencing strategy development.

Technological Developments

There are many technological developments, rapidly triggering and driving strategy development for NPHIs, including in areas like laboratory services, data technology, information technology systems (IT-systems), analytical methods, and artificial intelligence (AI). The availability of new types of data and new technological possibilities also implies addressing legal challenges.

Technical developments in the laboratories, and new infectious agents due to climate change and global movements, trigger reassessment of laboratory services, including biocontainment.

Internal Factors

Not only have the pandemic and other external factors triggered and driven the NPHI strategy process. Many internal factors do too. Some of the factors noted were change of director general, an external peer review of the institute, an increase in size leading to internal organisational change, and lack of capacity due to high workload. Some NPHIs have regular reviews of strategic plans every three to six years. One newly established NPHI was developing its first strategy, one NPHI listed a shift from focusing on risk factors to the driving forces for these risk factors as a reason for change, another the need to establish and ensure strong and sustainable quality processes based on the International Organization for Standardization (ISO) standard for quality management.

TOP STRATEGIC QUESTIONS AND PRIORITY TASKS

Explanation: some of the key words below are highlighted in **bold** for easier reading and quotes from the respondents are in *italics*.

Strategic Questions

The NPHIs were asked to list their top five strategic questions for their NPHIs for the next two to five years. Some of these questions can be seen as a method or means to initiating further discussion on clarifying priority tasks.

The first overarching question was that of **purpose** or mission. Respondents reported key strategic questions such as: *What are we here for?* And *What impact do we wish to have?* Open questions like this are intended to initiate reflexion and discussion.

Then there were questions on the specific **role** of a NPHI having a population perspective of health prevention, promotion, and preparedness. Some of the responding questions were: *How can we collectively push forward the health protection agenda?*, *How can NPHI communicate the necessity of population-oriented public health activities?*, and *How can we best strengthen preparedness and response under difficult circumstance?*

The next questions centred around a **situation analysis** of the present, emerging challenges and how to prioritise. Responses included: *What are our key challenges and opportunities?*, and *How will we respond to new threats (climate change; extreme weather events; conflict)?*

Organisational structure of public health and the NPHI's relationship with other stakeholders were reflected in several responders' strategy questions: *What is the optimal division of roles and tasks between NPHI and stakeholders?*, *How can we continue to build on the unprecedented collaborative ways of working across the different sectors and professional groups?*, and *How can we best help secure and nurture our scientific independence?*. The challenges of funding were also raised: *How can NPHI best be funded in the future?*

The **quality** of the NPHIs' deliverables were key to several responders: *How will we ensure we are the best we can be?*, *Our workforce is our biggest asset - how can we best support and be the destination of choice for scientists and health professionals?*, and *How best to evaluate and measure impact and outcomes of programmes and interventions?*

Finally, there were also strategy questions on **technological advances** and taking **lessons learned from the pandemic** forward: *How can we best adapt to og utilize advances in data and technology?*, *So much has been learned about vaccines during the pandemic - how can we do more in future?*, *How will the phasing out of Covid-19 impact our institute?*, and *How to strengthen capabilities in analysis and data science, health needs assessment and health status reporting?*

Priority Tasks
Several NPHIs answered by listing a priority of tasks rather than questions. The strategy questions may also initiate the process of setting a direction and defining priority tasks. A range of topics were listed, some of which were: Health security, preparedness, and response, including vaccine preparedness; NCDs, including obesity, and child and adolescent mental health; climate, environment, and health; one-health, migration, social inequalities, and aging.

From a more overarching perspective, there were recommendations for moving from individually lifestyle-oriented interventions towards systems-level change and shifting more towards preparedness and prevention efforts.

Social factors and determinants of health were important to many responders, and one listed as a priority: *Health inequities and how we can become better at addressing and understanding what drives health inequities and how to reduce these*.

Many also highlighted the rapid advances in **new technologies**, digitalisation, improved surveillance and artificial intelligence: *A modern management of data oriented towards an optimisation of their use and availability and framed by ethical rules.*

With the Covid-19 pandemic in fresh memory, there were many statements on **health security**, improved surveillance, crises management and global collaboration. Some responses were: *Having our scientific knowledge base optimally equipped for being ready to advice on the societal issues we are asked to address today as well as tomorrow is of key importance*, *Strengthen public health systems at the local level that can be rapidly scaled up when needed and are integrated with the health system and social services*, and *Prioritise rapid deployment of core public health functions—surveillance, testing, contact tracing, and quarantine—and ensure equitable access to supplies.*

Research and the need to increase the knowledge on effective public health measures are important to several respondents: *Need to gear research activities more towards problem and policy-driven applied or translational research*, to ensure it can lead to *changes in practice or improvements in health.*

The **organisation of public health**, incl. roles, collaborations, and scientific independence of NPHIs were key to many: *With regards to scientific independence, we see the dilemma of 'proper distance' and 'role strictness' in our role as 'trusted advisor'. Stakeholder involvement in our work while protecting independence, transparency and avoidance of conflict of interest, including transformation to two-way communication with and working towards more involvement of citizens.* The ethical responsibilities of inclusiveness were clear: *Uphold privacy, equity, and human rights in all public health activities.*

The workforce is the key asset of NPHIs as shown in responses: *Keeping our employees healthy and supported*, *Dynamic and human management of people*, and *Attract personnel, being an attractive employer, invest in and prepare for successors for single points of knowledge.*

Regarding **funding and financing**, there were both statements on financing of NPHIs and the importance of funding of public health research *Need to prioritise to manage with wide span of tasks and limited resources - to deliver strategic objectives*, and *More focus on research and financial support for research.*

STAKEHOLDER DISCUSSIONS OF SURVEY FINDINGS

IANPHI European Network Annual Meeting Lisbon
The preliminary results of the survey were presented at the IANPHI Europe Network Annual Meeting April 20-21, 2023, in Lisbon, Portugal. The findings resonated well with the participants in the ensuing discussion. Being a knowledge producing governmental agency is challenging for many NPHIs in finding the right balance between scientific independence on the one hand and wanting to influence policy

and being dependent in financial and organisational matters on the other hand. When asked about challenges NPHIs are least prepared for, many were concerned about political turmoil, disinformation, and resource constraints. About the hopes for achievements, there were voices for increased trust and understanding from politicians, and increased dialogue with civil society and the general population.

After the group discussions, two questions were presented, and the participants asked to answer electronically.

The responses to the question *What challenge are European NPHIs least prepared for?* can be categorised as follows:
- Trust and information, incl. how to retain trust by citizens and politicians, and how to rebut disinformation,
- Many statements around the relationship to policy and politics, both on dealing with inconsistencies and uncertainties in politics and on challenges in translating knowledge into policy,
- Budgets, coping with increasing responsibilities with decreasing budgets,
- Workforce capacity, developing and retaining competent staff,
- Cross-sectoral work and collaboration across disciplines and sectors, and
- A large variety of public health topics.

To the question *What is the one thing you most hope that you and your NPHI has achieved?* Many of the same topics as in the previous question, were brough forward:
- Strategy and relationship with policymaking within government,
- Trust,
- Internal organisational issues, and
- Resources and Population health improvements.

IANPHI Global Webinar

The IANPHI Webinar on November 8, 2023, was open to all members globally, and it started with a presentation of the draft findings from the survey before directors from the member institutes in Montenegro, Canada, Mozambique, and Pakistan, gave a ten minutes' presentation each on the most pressing strategic choices for NPHIs now.

Many of the same topics and issues as in the European meeting, were raised by the presenters showing that the findings from European NPHIs are recognizable in other geographical regions as well. Challenges on development and retainment a **high-quality workforce** were highlighted in the ensuing discussion. Non-governmental institutions and the private sector pay better salaries than the NPHI in some countries, and it is necessary to have a diverse workforce to cover the wide range of tasks for a NPHI. To have a career development plan for the employees and good internal support, can counter for some of the challenges. Asking the panel of presenters what we can do together, there was a unison response that NPHIs must work more closely together, especially with neighbouring countries, and not only during crisis. A repository of tools in IANPHI should be developed further.

DISCUSSION

The last five years seems to have created more dynamic developments than previous five-year cycles. These tumultuous times have brought forward new fundamental strategic questions for the NPHIs to deal with. Three of them are:

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- How can we redefine the relationship between NPHIs and key national partners, and especially: Politicians and government, society and the media, academia, and the private sector?
- How can we get the priorities between the big agenda items right? How best to balance between pandemic preparedness, NCDs, public health effects of climate change, and inequalities of health to name a few?

We hope that the findings in this report, can be useful for NPHIs, governments and partners, creating ideas, giving food for thought to develop public health and the NPHIs further. We also believe that the report can assist IANPHI in its work on developing and updating its frameworks, tools and resources for the NPHIs across the world.